

## **Nutrition and Exercise Program Opens the Gate to Healthy Living for Upstate Women**

### **Issue**

Linda G. had always struggled with her weight. When she lost her home, she had to rely on vending machines and convenience stores for food. Gradually, her body weight increased. The additional weight initiated more physical problems—acid reflux and high blood pressure. At the point when Linda had no money and no other resources, she turned to an organization called Shepard's Gate, a shelter for women in Greenville, S.C., for help.

Health issues associated with obesity and overweight are not uncommon in South Carolina. In 2006, 36 percent of adults reported that they were overweight and 29 percent reported they were obese. Lack of physical activity and unhealthy eating habits are considered the primary causes for these staggering statistics. Reports indicate 25 percent of S.C. adults did not have any kind of exercise in the last 30 days. These unhealthy behaviors cost our state \$1.06 billion yearly in medical costs related to obesity and obesity-related chronic diseases.

### **Intervention**

The South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control Region 2's staff (DHEC) is working diligently to address these critical health issues. Thanks to Preventive Health and Health Services (PHHS) Block Grant funding, DHEC health education and nutrition staff were able to offer a Train-the-Trainer Nutrition and Physical Activity Workshop for lay health ministers including staff of Shepard's Gate, a shelter for homeless women that offers food, assistance with job placement and a safe place to stay.

Once basic needs are met, one of the most popular resources at the shelter is the weekly nutrition and physical activity class. In the train-the-trainer workshop, staff and lay ministers learned how to promote healthy behaviors in targeted populations. Key topics included:

- Eating five to nine fruits and vegetables per day;
- Explaining how to choose low fat and low salt foods;
- Offering tips on how to put movement in your day; and
- Demonstrating how physical activity affects your health.

### **Impact**

Linda G, who is a regular participant in the weekly nutrition and physical activity class, has dramatically changed her eating habits, lost seven and a half pounds, and eliminated most of her acid reflux problems. Other positive outcomes included:

- The Nutrition and Physical Activity Workshop is fully integrated into the Shepard's Gates program and reaches seven to 12 clients each week;
- An evaluation showed that all participants of the train-the-trainer session planned to conduct workshop classes for their clients or church members;
- Nine other lay ministers were trained at the February workshop;
- Tentative plans are to provide another training this fall; and
- Shepard's Center staff report a wiser selection of food items by clients, an increase in the number of clients who walk on the property for exercise, an interest among clients to start an exercise class, and a decrease in blood pressure in at least two clients resulting from weight loss.

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